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On the Moon of Europa

A pale blue cap bearing the logo of the 1995 Houston Astros reflects in the rearview mirror. The hat sits upon the head of a grey haired and heavyset man wearing a tight fitting Galactic Transportation Federation shirt. His exhausted grey eyes squint ahead as the cab barrels through space faster than the fastest fighter jet fly go on Earth. The radio has a low droning sound of staticy classical music with the occasional proclamation that the station is “a subsidiary of the Galactic Commerce and Innovation Board”. The man glances back in the mirror, and sees a young woman sporting shoulder length, black hair who holds back her desire to vomit.

“Hey, can you try and drive it steady? I think I’m gonna throw up,” she says, gripping her upside-down helmet like a trashcan.

The cab’s turbulence wasn’t something Harold noticed after doing thousands of these trips, so he often didn’t turn on the cab’s built-in stabilizer effect. His cab wasn’t the newest state of the art issue, so it often used extra fuel when stabilizing against the space turbulence.

“Turbulence? Unless you wanna pay more then you better get used to it. I’ve had this cab for an eternity, and it gets tougher and tougher to pay for those new parts,” Harold shouts back to the rear of the cab trying not to take his eyes off the cosmic nothingness ahead of him.

The girl looks up at him, her eyes a little tearful from holding back her lunch, as she states her case, “Well if I hurl across the back of this tin can, then I ain’t paying extra to clean it up.” Her sky blue eyes gaze back down at the interior of her helmet.

Harold glances back in the mirror once more, and sees the girl despondently looking downward into the abyss of her helmet. Quietly he presses the anti-turbulence button knowing

full well about the money related consequences of his actions. Suddenly, the cab begins rocking violently as the red indicator light flashes. Harold's eyes dart back at his passenger as her head has subdued itself into the helmet. A cacophony of beeps and miniature sirens blare before going silent. Then the violent rocking stops, and the cab sails along smoother than it had in any of the most recent thousand journeys it had taken before. The stabilizer works, Harold thinks to himself. For a time the cab ride continues silently with only the occasional radio proclamation, or the whizzing by of an asteroid.

"Say, uhh, how's the bumpiness for you now? Feeling any better back there?" Harold asks half hoping there won't be any response at all.

"I feel better, but I really shouldn't have eaten that octopus back on Mars," the passenger complains. "I don't think I'm ever gonna give Old Marion my business again".

The cab comes to a screeching halt as Harold swiftly increases the force field radius and turns around. "Listen here little one, I-"

"Don't call me little one... my name's Star," the girl interjects.

"Alright *Star*, listen here. Marion's an old friend of mine, so don't you go talkin' bad 'bout her now," Harold sternly says, pointing his fat finger in Star's face. He turns around, and starts the cab moving along again.

Star sits quietly in the back, her helmet resting next to her in the portable decontamination unit installed against regulations. Directly in front of her the passenger seat has a screen embedded in it. Curiously, Star taps on the screen, but she gets no response. Across the floorboard of the car she notices odd stains, clumps of various fur types, and even some loose cables. Her attention shifts to the vast nothingness of space's seemingly infinite void, a sight she expects will become all too familiar to her in the near future. In the window's faint reflection

Star's sky blue eyes shine, and her lightly freckled face looks saddened. Space's black void is broken up by the quickly passing shimmer of far off stars possibly home to their own worlds or galaxies like the Milky Way, Star thinks. Occasionally an asteroid bumps off the force field causing Star to flinch and shriek, but Harold just lightly chuckles knowing nothing bad will come of it.

After another long silence, Star asks "How'd you get into this line of work? I mean, uhm, transporting things to the backass of the galaxy?"

"Well I had some trouble back on Earth, and well this cab… it became an escape from it all, ya know?"

"Yeah, I think I know what you mean. What kind of trouble did you get into?"

Harold is taken aback by the question, normally his passengers don't ask personal questions, let alone talk at all.

"Well, it had to do with taxes and cargo. All I got to keep was this old baby," Harold reveals as he softly rubs the dashboard. "But I ain't saying no more than that," he states.

"So why do this work?" Star inquires further.

"Cause there ain't much more that I'm really qualified for. Plus I had some trouble back on Earth," Harold says, feeling a bit less heavy than normal.

"You and me both," Star replies softly.

Suddenly the radio plays a message differing from its normal transmission. "Attention, a flurry of comets have been detected in the upcoming sector, 979Q-Alpha, and all transportation are advised to touch down and dock immediately, or face potential financial retribution and life endangering consequences," the radio squeaks out over noisy static.

"Well Star, looks like we're gonna have to stop off for a bit. Sorry 'bout the delay in your trip," Harold says as he pings the nearest docking station.

"Are you sure we can't go?" Star asks.

"If you have a death wish then we might," Harold retorts.

Star slumps down in her seat. Her head races about the consequences of a few hour delay, and how she wishes it weren't so.

"Europa it is!" Harold proclaims, altering the course for the nearby moon.

As the two come into port, Star looks out the window and sees millions of flickering lights, and thousands of ships coming and going. There is a scurry of movement below, men and women in space suits fixing ships, carrying cargo, wrangling creatures far from their green pastures and forests on Earth. Never before had Star seen such a robust and lively city among the cosmos. Her voyeurism comes to an end as Harold taps the cab's roof indicating to her to put on her helmet, and get ready for a brief reprieve before the rest of their journey. He takes a concentrated look at her, truly thinking about his past for the first time in years. Harold finishes depressurizing the cabin as the pair go wait out the storm in a local bar.

The space bar's television flickers with wavy purple and brown lines as the comet barrage barrels past. Its signal is already very faint as it runs on a modified form of radio waves that often get interconnected with news transmissions and other correspondence from Earth and Mars. Every now and then the static laden and monochromatic reruns of *Cheers* that nostalgically play over the television will output audio conveying the passing of a loved one, or even the news of another million wandering migrants following a territorial dispute on Earth. Though these messages are often ignored by the space wayfarers sipping away their sorrows, loneliness, and displacement among the musty and dimly lit bar.

“It’s all the same stuff usually,” mutters Harold as he takes a big gulp of his cactus punch. “Bunch of people with no place else to go, stuck in a weird limbo here.”

Star sits quietly just stirring the ginger ale that Harold so graciously bought her. The sheen of her sky blue eyes is hidden as she looks downward. Slowly, Star runs her fingers around the rim of her cup very methodically. Harold’s voice has disappeared into background noise as she becomes even more deeply engrossed in her drink’s soft bubbling. Suddenly, a hand appears upon her wrist.

“Star, are you doing alright?” Harold inquires.

Stammering, Star blurts out, “Yeah, uhm, yeah. I just haven’t had ginger ale in years.”

Unsure what to make of this, Harold repeats his question, “You ever seen that show?” Harold gestures to the flickering television where Sam Malone and Diane Chambers trade flirtatious jabs at one another.

“Yeah, I used to watch it with my dad when I was a kid,” Star recalls with an air of confliction.

“Those must be some good memories then,” Harold states

“Yeah, they’re pretty alright,” Star says, somewhat despondently.

Sensing a bit of tension Harold quickly interjects, “The show means a lot to me, met my wife at a costume party where I was dressed like Sam Malone. Can you believe I used to look like that?” Harold fondly states, recalling a memory from a seemingly different lifetime.

Star chuckles a little as she imagines Harold looking like a young Ted Danson with a full head of hair, eyes not beset with crow’s feet and wrinkles, and no pot belly acting as a natural dinner tray.

Harold bares a genuine and warm smile as Star's laugh reminds him of his daughters, and he takes a sip of cactus juice. He examines the mug it was given to him in, and finds that it reads "Walt Disney World 1992" on it.

"Disney World, haven't been there since my girls were young," Harold states, showing Star the mug's inscription.

"Did you have a fun time then?" Star asks while finally sipping her ginger ale.

The faulty audio of *Cheers* suddenly stops as a broadcast cuts loudly across the bar revealing that the comet is expected to finish passing by in a little over three Earth hours. Hearing this, Harold nods his head in a way that seems to say that he expected this.

"The G-CIB always pulls this crap. They know it isn't gonna actually take that long, but they do it anyway," Harold complains.

"The what?" Star asks, confused by Harold's shorthand.

"The G-CIB, it's short for the Galactic Commerce and Innovation Board," Harold clarifies.

"Ohhhh. We used to just always say 'The Board' back on Earth. Guess I don't know your *groovy* lingo," Star mocks back laughingly.

Harold gives her a discerning glare as he pulls out a pen and grabs a napkin from the side of the table before drawing a three-by-three grid on it.

"If you're gonna make fun of me, you might as well get your butt kicked in a game of tic-tac-toe too," Harold challenges.

"Okay, but if I win you're double timing it when we get back out there," Star says.

"You got a deal, hot shot," Harold replies back.

Star takes the pen from him very swiftly and draws an ‘X’ in the middle square, a fire burning in her eyes. Two episodes of *Cheers* pass as countless scribbled upon napkins scatter across the table, and the other tables become devoid of napkins. While in the heat of another likely draw, Harold had figured out Star’s strategy to go for the three corners early on, the space bartender strides over.

“Hey, you the owner of that space cab out front?” he states.

“Sure am, you guys got a new parking limit or something?” Harold replies.

Rubbing his brow the bartender informs Harold, “No, your cab’s in some trouble. Some guys transporting some space cargo accidentally backed into it and smashed your back thrusters. They’re outside saying they’ll pay to get it replaced, but it’ll probably take a few hours.”

The glow on Star’s face suddenly fades as she looks at Harold’s angry and wrinkled face. Harold nods his head at the inconvenience as he tells Star, “Okay suit back up we gotta go deal with this.”

“Is this gonna slow us down even more?” Star asks, grabbing Harold’s arm.

Harold nods his head as he zips up the front of his space suit again.

Star begins putting her arms back into her suit when her phone lights up. She quietly looks at the brightened up screen. A voice transmission from her father has been received.

“I gotta take a look at this message really quickly, I’ll meet you over there,” Star says quickly as she heads off to an old phone booth installed in the bar. Harold having already made his way over the exit nods his head as she processes Star rushing off.

“Hope the kid is okay,” Harold quietly says, and he plods on out into the busy space port.

Star quickly attempts to unlock her phone, but mistypes the passcode enough times that it locks her out. She slams her head against the glass in frustration as she thinks about how long it's

been since she saw her father. The thirty second wait feels like an eternity before Star carefully presses each number with an unknown determination.

“Hi darling,” the hoarse voice says through the phone’s muffled speakers, “We are just about ready to get going here. I’ve got lots of people getting things loaded up, getting our tools ready, and sending out their last messages. You’d better hurry up or you’re going to miss the departing. I hope this message finds you well.”

As the transmission ends there is a static that plays before silence. The laughter of the audience at Norm’s entrance into the fictional bar, Cheers, plays distantly in the background. Star’s black hair falls and masks the sides of her face as a few tear drops fall onto the screen of her phone, distorting the backlit display illuminating with notices of goodbyes from friends on various different platforms. Sitting in silence for a few minutes, Star remains near motionless, her hands begin to turn a light blue from no movement. Then a sudden tapping shocks her out of her stasis.

“Hey, we’re closing down for a little bit to restock. You better go meet up with your friend,” the space bartender decrees.

Star grips her phone hard, feeling the moistened surface, as her reddened sky blue eyes gaze up at the mustached man. She nods her head, and slowly departs the booth.

As she nears the door, the space bartender pipes up, “Listen, I don’t know what you heard in there, but is it really worth crying over?”

“Just mind your own business, dude,” Star snaps back as she locks her helmet in place, and exits the bar in search of Harold.

The mechanic wears a faded and worn red boiler suit. His stitched in name tag reads Lewis, which becomes darkened and obfuscated as he runs his filthy oiled covered hands up and

down his red suit. Both thrusters resemble crumpled up toasters that had been partially put into a hydraulic press. Harold scratches his head as the mechanic goes under the cab using his hovering creeper. With thin walling, the garage's tools are locked down when not in use, and the walls were devoid of extraneous decoration incase of a potential airlock breach. Currently, Harold's cab fills near the entire space up.

"Does it look bad under there?" Harold inquires.

"Well I can only tell you it might be a bit more than just fixing these thrusters. You could be looking at having to retire this wagon," Lewis shouts from below the car.

"What do you mean? If she needs new parts then I'll get the parts. Are the parts expensive?" Harold states.

Wheeling back out from under the cab, oil now on his face, Lewis conveys, "It isn't the needing new parts or the price. Your cab's old, and it doesn't take many new parts. You're gonna fail space inspection"

Harold leans up against the cab as he murmurs under his breath, "Damn board".

Memories of the cab begin to rush back to Harold as he contemplates the potential finality with his vehicle. He recalls the warm summer day when the dealer put the keys into his hands, a sense of ownership finally becoming his. The soft and tender voice of his wife fills his ears as if she was there expressing her desires to take the cab by Venus, and pay homage to the planet's namesake. His daughters ask when they'll be able to go to Mars for the first time. Harold's eyes water as he realizes he must say goodbye to his steadfast partner, his constant for many years, and the final link to his family.

"Hello," Star's voice shouts, travelling from the airlock to break Harold's thoughts. She walks over to him as he quickly wipes small tears away.

“So what’re you gonna do?” Lewis asks.

“Do what?” Star inquires.

“Time to say goodbye to old Lila here,” Harold somberly says, placing his hand on the crumpled thrusters.

“Wait, does that mean we aren’t going to be able to leave here?” Star frantically replies.

“No, we're probably gonna be here a bit. Listen, that’s not at the top of my concerns right now,” Harold quickly says.

“You’re not gonna try and help me, anymore? You seemed to actually care, but now I see you only care about yourself,” Star shoots back.

Exploding in anger Harold yells, “Just get out of here, okay. I got a lot to do right now. You wouldn’t get it.”

Star’s eyes instantly well up as she turns around and runs back to the airlock. The heavy darkened glass door slowly descends, and creates a warped and shadowy look of Harold, who is now frantically tapping on his phone. Air begins hissing around Star as the door thuds into place, her suit feels hot as tears stream down her face, the suit projects warnings of unstable interior conditions into Star’s ears, but they don’t deter the tears. Click. A green light illuminates, indicating the clearance to go, yet Star stands in the airlock staring at Harold through her helmet and the darkened door. Harold turns his head away as he pulls down his cap. Star exits the airlock back to the bustling moon colony.

The low rumble of the spaceport shakes the ground below Star’s feet. Countless ships come and go above her, their thrusters shining brightly as the stars of untold cosmic vistas are washed out in their glow. In front of her sits the vast plain of the moon, mostly undeveloped except for a few foundations being laid out. Behind Star is a long trail of boot prints tracing all

the way from the colony. Star throws rocks from the ground and watches them slowly fall in the low gravity environment as she reflects about Harold's outburst.

"You really messed this one up. Couldn't even make it all the way out to the edge of the solar system," Star thinks to herself. She pulls her knees up to her chest, and wraps her arms around them as she stares out across the wide expanse of the moon.

Far off in the distance a star shines, catching Star's attention as she closes her eyes and thinks about the last time she saw her father. They had actually spent the day together, for once. The air was crisp, the golden brown leaves fell down all around them and made a crunching sound as Star hopped from one to the next. Her father seemed to tower over her then, she recalled, thinking about how she might be taller than him now. Star remembered the look of the green park bench with its white and yellow floral design, chipping paint, and iron arm rests.

"My little starlight, please come and sit with me," Star's father implored her as she kept cruncking the leaves.

"Why papa?" Star replied while throwing up a pile of leaves.

"I have something very important to discuss with you," Star's father sternly said as he grabbed her by the arm and put her on the bench next to him.

The park was bustling that day on account of the upcoming rocket launch that would launch later that week. No one had noticed a little black haired girl and her mustached, salt and pepper haired father sitting among a pile of leaves.

"As you know darling, I'm going away," Star's father said before a pause, Star's little sky blue eyes gazed up at him waiting, "And I won't be back for a long time," he finished.

"Where are you going? Can I come and visit?" Star asked as if this was like her father's other trips.

“No, my little one. I have to go away for a long time. This is some very important work, you’ll understand when you’re older” he told his daughter very firmly. Star got quiet after that, and she looked onward noticing a streetlamp that had just illuminated. The two of them sat there in silence, the two of them together, and then it was just Star again, sitting alone on the moon. Tears running down Star’s eyes as she feels like the kid sitting on a park bench.

“Hey little one,” a husky voice says from behind.

Star sits up quickly as she turns around, and there stands Harold. Behind the visor of his space suit sits the baseball cap atop his thin grey hair. Harold takes a seat next to Star as she slowly curls back into a ball.

“You really walked a hell of a long way away,” Harold says.

“Well, where else was I supposed to go? Your ship’s broken, and I don’t have enough time left,” Star flatley states.

Harold puts his hand on Star’s shoulder as he says, “I know. Listen, I was really harsh back there. You didn’t do nothing wrong”.

Star brushes off his hand by rolling her shoulder as she turns further away from him. The bright star she was looking at is no longer in view, just the blackness of space. Harold doesn’t move as he sits looking ahead at the bright light that Star was just looking at. While his suit keeps him warm, he feels the coldness of space all around him. Star and Harold sit there for an extended period of time, neither saying anything, but neither getting up either.

“You ever think about how it's kinda funny that your name is Star, and you’re all the way out here?” Harold remarks after a bit.

Star doesn’t say anything.

Not wanting to sit in silence, Harold continues, “I named my two girls Veronica and Alex. Veronica after my aunt, and Alex after my sister. Never thought about Star though”.

“It’s a stupid name,” Star softly replies.

“Why’s that?” Harold inquiers.

“Cause my dad gave me it,” Star says with a bit of anger.

“You don’t love your dad?” Harold asks.

Star doesn’t immediately respond. She takes a deep breath and sighs as she turns back toward the bright star.

“It isn’t that I don’t love him. He’s just never made me his first priority,” Star reveals, her voice cracking a bit.

Harold wraps his arm around her again, this time Star doesn’t push him away.

“You’re going to see him, aren’t you?” Harold asks, already knowing the answer.

Star nods her head as tears run down her face.

“Why’d you have to go meet him all the way out at the edge of the solar system?” Harold states quizzically.

“He’s a scientist, and he’s about to go on a voyage. I can go and be with him, or stay back on Earth and probably never see him again forever,” Star says, plainly.

“If I could see my daughters again, I’d give everything. It’s part of why I got so upset over the cab. I told my girls I’d be back to see them again, and we’d go for a ride in it,” Harold says, his eyes welling up.

“Oh, I see,” Star states.

“I don’t like having to break my promise to them,” Harold replies between tears.

“So why not go back and see them?” Star asks.

Activating the air dry feature in his suit, Harold states, “I got into some trouble doing space smuggling when I was younger. I was just tryin’ to provide for my family. But now I’m not permitted to fly to Earth. Haven’t seen em’ in twenty years now.”

“And why don’t they come see you?” Star replies.

“My wife didn’t take too kindly to my line of work after a while. Anyway, doubt they’d even know how to find me now,” Harold states.

Star turns toward Harold and gives him a hug. Her arms grip tight around his big chest, and he softly places his arms around her. Their embrace ends after a minute, and the two sit there quietly looking at the horizon, at the bright star.

“I think I need to give my dad a call, and tell him I won’t make it,” Star says softly.

“That’s a good idea. Maybe I’ll call my wife,” Harold replies.

Star gently rests her head on Harold’s shoulder. Harold takes a glance at Star, and he feels a new sense of obligation that he hadn’t felt for so long. He softly smiles as he thinks about what to do next, but no words come to him. Far off in the distance the starlight the two were watching goes out. A message appears on Star’s phone. She discreetly checks it before letting out a soft sigh.

“What’s it about,” Harold inquires.

“Dad’s left. Guess that’s it then,” Star says. Harold places his arm around Star and holds her tightly.

“Do you wanna go back and watch some more *Cheers*?” Harold plainly asks.

“Yeah, that sounds good,” Star concurs, not knowing what the future holds now.

THE END

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